

# Vacation offers

Vacation promotions are one of the hottest ideas to hit the market in a long time. Mailboxes bulge with postcards offering trips to tropical paradises, exotic cruises or exciting gambling trips to Las Vegas. Telephones ring off the hook with offers for free vacations with the purchase of a travel club membership.

Unfortunately, consumers usually find out too late that they are not receiving a free vacation, but a vacation certificate. The problem with owning a vacation certificate is that you own just that—a piece of paper that allows you to request a vacation; you don't own the vacation at all.

There are at least two types of vacation certificates—those sold by travel agents and those sold to promoters to use as premiums or sales gimmicks. The certificates cost the promoters \$30 to \$60; they usually end up costing you hundreds.

Whether you pay for your certificate or get it as a gift, don't pack your bags and buy suntan lotion. You're probably not going anywhere. Once you read the fine print, you'll see how expensive or difficult it is to get away on your getaway.

## **Deposits are key to profits**

The deposit you are required to make, before you get the details, is the heart of many vacation certificate schemes. Once they have your money you discover that space on flights and for hotel rooms is limited and uncertain—trips are offered on a space-available basis. Travel is prohibited on holidays, weekends, and even during prime tourist months. If space does become available, you may find yourself on a southern beach in July. If your deposit is refundable, it's often applied toward your hotel bill. The promoter keeps the money if

you don't go on the trip, and few people do.

You may find that the "first class accommodations" you expected are located in the seedy part of town, or miles away from the nearest beach or the main resort attractions. Some promoters offer "bonus coupons" for free meals, drinks, discount gambling, or show tickets, along with the vacation certificates. Often you can pick these coupons up anywhere in the vacation area free for the asking.

## **Ask questions**

If you're contacted about a great vacation deal, get answers to the following questions:

Exactly how much is it going to cost?

- Ask about taxes, transportation, meals, or other handling fees.

(over)

- Look for hidden costs. Be suspicious of offers that require you to purchase other products or services in order to be eligible.
- Any “free” vacation that involves additional costs is not much of a prize.
- Is the deposit refundable or non-refundable?

What special conditions or terms are involved?

- Do two people have to travel?
- Are you required to purchase one ticket at full price in order to receive another? Usually the cost of the second ticket more than covers the cost of the “free” one.
- Is travel restricted to a certain time period?
- Is the trip tied to a time-share membership sales presentation? If so, prepare yourself for a high pressure sales pitch.

What are the specific arrangements?

- What lodging is available? Get the exact name and location of the hotel. Don’t settle for assurances that lodging will include “first” class accommodations.”
- Get the name of the airline. Ask if reservations can be made directly with the airline or only through the promoter.
- Ask the promoter to send you all information in writing and carefully review the material before you invest any money in the trip.

Never give your credit card number unless you expect to be charged for something. No matter what you are told, they do not need your number to verify your identity—they want to make a charge to your account. Some promoters

direct you to call a 900 telephone number for more information about vacation deals. Placing a call to a 900 number will result in a charge on your phone bill.

Complaints on file show that many vacation promoters misrepresent the terms and conditions of vacations, fail to give refunds upon request, or go out of business altogether.

To check on complaints against a particular company or to file a complaint, contact the Bureau of Consumer Protection at:

**(800) 422-7128**

**FAX: (608) 224-4939**

**TTY: (608) 224-5058**

**E-MAIL:**

**[datcph hotline@datcp.state.wi.us](mailto:datcph hotline@datcp.state.wi.us)**

**WEBSITE:**

**<http://datcp.state.wi.us/>**